DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 061 277 TM 001 212

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TITLE Does It Matter Which Initial Reading Approach Is Used?
PUB DATE Apr 72
NOTE 2p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, Illinois, April 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Analysis of Variance; *Grade 1; Phonics; Post Testing; Pretests; *Program Evaluation; Reading Achievement; *Reading Instruction; Reading Programs; *Reading Skills; Statistical Analysis; Textbooks; *Word Recognition
IDENTIFIERS Metropolitan Readiness Test; *Wide Range Achievement Test

ABSTRACT

Three approaches to initial reading instruction were evaluated to determine their relative effectiveness in establishing word recognition skills. Significant differences between the three groups of children were found in the posttest scores: a special alphabet approach produced highest scores; a phonetic approach, next highest; and a look-say approach produced lowest scores. (MS)

ED 061277

American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, 1972.

DOES IT MATTER WHICH INITIAL READING APPROACH IS USED?

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Reading is the most important tool which children use in most academic pursuits, and techniques which enhance reading skills may be expected to facilitate acquisition of knowledge encompassing various curricular fields. The majority of primary grade children develop a level of reading skill adequate for general academic performance regardless of the teaching method employed, and many educators feel that there is probably no one best way to teach reading (Love, 1970). As a result, evaluations of most effective means for enhancing reading skills have not uncommonly been reserved for those children with reading difficulty. This study had as its principal objective the comparative evaluation of three different, distinct approaches to initial reading instruction, to determine if one approach was more effective in establishing basic word recognition skills by the end of first grade.

METHOD

All children entering first grade in a suburban school district were given the Metropolitan Readiness Test to establish initial levels of reading readiness. Each class was taught reading for the duration of the first grade by one of three methods, involving either a phonic approach, a look-say approach, or a special alphabet approach, using standard textbook methods for each approach. Although no strict matching was done, group mean readiness levels were almost identical among children taught by the different methods. At the end of first grade, each child was individually tested for word recognition skills with the Wide Range Achievement Test. For the children taught with a special alphabet approach, approximately half were tested with a commercially available modified version of the Wide Range, which used a special alphabet test mode. Analysis of variance was then computed among the three teaching methods to discover if methods differentially affected grade level scores on the Wide Range. A T test for correlated groups was computed between the two testing methods for children taught by the special alphabet approach. Totally, 1132 children were studied, representing 555 boys and 577 girls.

RESULTS

Mean Metropolitan Readiness levels placed children at the 69 percentile of beginning first graders. There were significant differences among the Wide Range Achievement Test scores of children taught by the three methods ($F = 129$, $p < .0001$). Children taught by the special alphabet approach scored highest (5th grade, 5th month), with children taught by the phonetic approach next (4th grade, 1st month), and children taught by the look-say approach lowest (2nd grade, 7th month). Differences between special alphabet and phonetic approaches were significantly different ($t = 3.2$, $p < .01$), and differences between phonetic and look-say approaches were also significant ($t = 9.3$, $p < .001$). Highest grade equivalent scores were made by the special alphabet group tested by special alphabet means, with only very slightly lower scores

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made by the special alphabet group tested by regular means. A comparison of means of testing reading skills with the children taught by special alphabet approach showed no significant differences.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The data do not support the contention that there is no one best way to teach reading, but rather suggest that for this sample of presumably normal first grade children the way in which reading is taught can be a significant determinant of how well initial word recognition skills are learned. Although all three teaching methods were satisfactory in that they all produced children reading above mean grade expectancy levels, the method of initial teaching instruction did appear to make considerable difference in children's reading skills, at least for those skills measured by the Wide Range Achievement Test. Since the WRAT measures primarily word recognition and decoding skills, there is no assurance that reading comprehension is differentially affected by initial teaching methods. In light of the fact that the mean readiness levels were somewhat above the national average, results should not be generalized to include children with lower readiness levels.

However, the data do strongly suggest that, for beginning first graders with good readiness levels, the use of a special alphabet approach is significantly better than either a look-say or a phonetic approach for teaching word recognition, and that in turn, the phonetic approach is significantly better than a look-say approach for imparting these skills. Further, the special alphabet approach did apparently generalize to traditional word attack skills, since those children taught by this approach did about as well on recognizing regular alphabet words as on recognizing words using a special teaching alphabet.

REFERENCE

Love, H. D. Parents Diagnose and Correct Reading Problems. Springfield, Ill., C. C. Thomas Co., 1970.